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Medical Officer Recalls Gulf of Tonkin Incident

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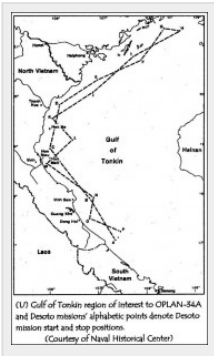
When we got up to join Task Force 77—the Ticonderoga [CV-14] and a lot of other ships, there were a lot of other ships in that task force.

On August 2, 1964, USS Maddox (DD-731) was on a routine patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin (international waters) when three North Vietnamese torpedo boats commenced a high speed torpedo run on her. The incident would lead to the so-called “Gulf of Tonkin Resolution” giving the president the power “to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”

In 2004, the BUMED History Office sat down with Dr. Samuel Halpern the medical officer aboard USS Maddox during those fateful days in 1964. We offer you his story—the tale of the escalation of the Vietnam War. (1)

From the start, nobody told me a damn thing. They kept me in the total dark. I didn’t know what was happening. I knew we were heading toward Taiwan. We pulled into Keelung and they brought some Marines aboard. They were led by a captain who was in charge of an eavesdropping device which was set up on the deck of the Maddox. There was a circle drawn around it and there were Marine guards. There was no question that if you got inside that circle, they would shoot you. These were mean-looking and very scary people.

Anyway, we pulled into Keelung and I still didn’t know what was



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going on.

The first time I knew we were at war was one morning when I woke up real early. It was just at the crack of dawn. I went out on deck. I used to like doing that. The South China Sea has wonderful things to see in August. It's still cool at that hour. The waters are in the Doldrums. It's flat and you have magnificent sunrises and sunsets.



I could see these specks off in the distance. And those specks were moving faster than anything I'd ever seen on water. There were three boats and I didn't know what the hell they were. I found out later they were PT boats. But I figured that nothing could move that fast unless it was a PT boat. And they were really

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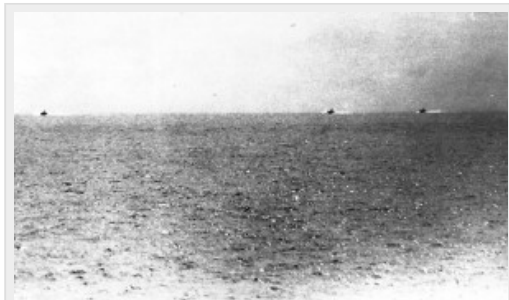
hauling. I figured there had been some action. I found out later that they had just raided North Vietnamese facilities.

When we got up to join [Task Force 77](#)—the [Ticonderoga \[CV-14\]](#) and a lot of other ships, there were a lot of other ships in that task force. I learned that we were a DeSoto patrol. That's an intelligence patrol. But I didn't know what we were trying to become intelligent about.

After resupplying and refueling, we headed into the Gulf of Tonkin. We slowed down to about 5 knots, very, very slowly. At 5 knots you can go a hell of a long way on a tin can because you're hardly burning any fuel. It was hot. It was so hot! Un-believable. We were surrounded by junks. Everywhere you looked there were junks, supposedly fishing vessels with nets out. We tried to avoid them but we had guns at the ready. I think were at Condition 3. (2) The next condition is General Quarters. At that time, and I could be wrong on this, half the guns are manned. We had 1 and 2 boilers on the line. A tin can of that age had four boilers. We were just kind of lazing along. Nothing really was happening.



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The day of the first attack, I was lying in my bunk and we went to GQ. I wondered why but I knew something was happening even before we went to general quarters. If you have been aboard a destroyer for some time, you could listen and tell the speed of the ship, where the seas are coming from, how many boilers you had on line, the whole thing. And I was pretty good at deciphering what was going on down in the fire rooms.

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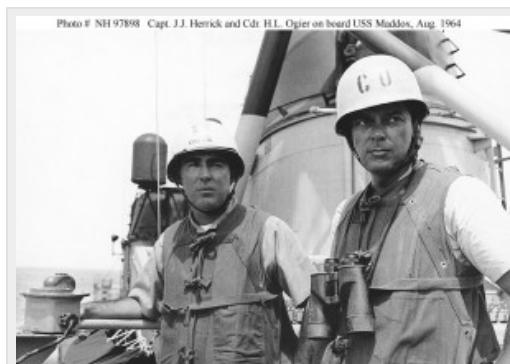
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We began picking up speed. The captain, Herb Ogier, came on the 1MC and said that we were being approached by North Vietnamese PT boats and we had information that they intended to engage us.(3) And if they closed to 10,000 yards, we were going to fire warning shots. If they got closer than that, there would probably be an engagement or something to that effect.

Before all this occurred, a Navy lieutenant kept running up and down and talking to the captain, Commodore [John] Herrick, and the XO. It was obvious that there was a lot of stuff coming down. I went to my GQ station in the wardroom and Aguilar and I set up the hospital there as best we could. We got out some mattresses and threw them on the floor for casualties. We secured all the stuff that we could in case we took a hit, which was ridiculous because if we took a hit . . . The [Maddox](#) had the watertight integrity of a sieve. She was just an old rust bucket. Nevertheless, we were ready.



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When we let go with the 5-inch 38 warning shots, I thought that was it. We were really speeding up and I could tell that we were bringing other boilers on line. The generators were whining like mad and we were doing somewhere between 25 and 28 knots. We could probably do about 31 knots in absolutely calm seas before we shook apart. And that would be with all four boilers on line.

All of a sudden I heard, "Torpedo in the water! Torpedo in the water!"



The planes from the Ticonderoga then came in and hit the PT boats.

Our 5-inch mounts were just wide open—Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! We were firing everything we could. And then I heard Crack! Crack! Crack! That was the sound of the 3-inch mounts. The 3-inch guns have a range of about 6,000 yards. And then I heard "Torpedo in the water! Torpedo in the water!" again followed by "Torpedo is past us." They were maneuvering the ship and the torpedoes were missing us.

I don't know how long the fight went on, not very long, and then the fight broke off. The planes from the [Ticonderoga](#) then came in and hit the PT boats. In that attack there were three PT boats. I was told we sunk one, one was dead in the water, and the other limped off.

We left the [Gulf of Tonkin](#) and rendezvoused with [Task Force 77](#). Then we were ordered back in. Accompanying us was the [USS Turner Joy \[DD-951\]](#), which was a younger destroyer than we were.

The night attack was on the 4th of August. I had gone to CIC [command operations center]

earlier in the day and I saw things on the radar scope indicating that we were surrounded. I wouldn't have known a hard target from a soft target. And weather will show up. But there were things everywhere and they seemed to be surrounding us when I was back there. I thought this didn't look too good, especially with the [Turner Joy](#) right behind us.

The [Turner Joy](#) was opening up and it was scary. You'd keep hoping that somebody's not making a mistake. Anyway, we kept getting these torpedo sightings. The sonar man was listening for high-pitched screws and doing the best job he could. He kept hearing those sounds and he had an option. You could either call them what you think—a torpedo—or you could take a chance that it wasn't a torpedo and you were wrong.



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Then the guys started piling in to the wardroom from the fire rooms. We had set "Zebra" throughout the ship. That means you are locked down. And you've got all these boilers on the line in the fire rooms and it gets up to 140 degrees. So the casualties started coming in and I did exactly what I was supposed to do. I got them back into action as quickly as I could. I jammed IV fluids into them, wet them down, and got them back into the fire rooms. Of course, they came back after about 10 minutes. The second time they would be sicker and I'd do the same thing again and send them back. I hated to do it. People were lying all over the wardroom floor. I was stepping over people. I had some whose veins had collapsed. You tried to jam an 18-gauge needle into a collapsed vein. It was amazing!

It really helps to have something to do in combat. And I was so damned busy. I'd hear these reports of torpedo in the water. I didn't give a damn. I had something to do. There wasn't anything I could do about the torpedo but I could do something about the guy lying there. And that's what I did. Those kids didn't realize that they did more for me than I did for them.



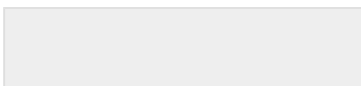
This Navy lieutenant kept running up to the bridge. He was monitoring everything the Vietnamese said. We had broken their code. (Not actual photo from incident)

We started lolling around there and not going very fast. I kept waiting for something to happen. It was very tense. This Navy lieutenant kept running up to the bridge. He was monitoring everything the Vietnamese said. We had broken their code. Late one night I was sleeping and the staff ops officer came in and shook me and said, "Doc, put your clothes on. The commodore wants to see you in his cabin." It was about 2 o'clock in the morning.

So I went up there and when I entered, the commodore looked awful. He was an interesting guy. Herrick was worried that this thing was going to spread into a giant Asian war. He smelled a rat as to what was going on. How much of the rat I never realized until I'd

had time to reflect on what was going on. Herrick had a headache and I gave him something for it. He said, "Doc, I want you to get out all the morphine and distribute a syrette to every man. We're gonna get hit tomorrow." And that kind of got my attention.

Anyway, we were sitting there waiting for the attack that was supposed to come. And waiting . . . and



waiting . . . and waiting . . . and waiting . . . Then the staff ops officer came to me and said, “Relax, Doc. The attack’s been called off.” So I guess what happened was the Navy lieutenant operating the eavesdropping gear heard they weren’t going to attack.

No more attacks occurred after that and we left the Gulf and rejoined Task Force 77. We then went back to Subic.

We took off shortly after that and came back to Long Beach and I was transferred to San Diego. I did the remainder of my time at the Coronado Annex of Balboa Hospital treating dependents. I left the Navy in July of ‘65.

(1) Oral History with LCDR (ret) Samuel Halpern, MC, USNR by Jan K. Herman. Session conducted on 16 March 2004.

(2) Condition 3 – A material condition of readiness commonly associated with wartime steaming where some, usually half, of the ship’s weapons are kept in a manned and ready status at all times. (www.hazegray.org)

(3) 1MC—The basic one-way communications system on a vessel. Reaches all spaces on a ship. Used for general announcements, and to transmit general alarm system signals. Control stations are located on the bridge, quarterdeck, and central station. Other transmitters may be installed at additional points (www.hazegray.org)



The commodore was an interesting guy. He worried that this thing was going to spread into a giant Asian war.

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